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Sensing the 'Sacred'?

Body, Senses and Intersensoriality in the Academic Study of Ritual

Tineke Nugteren

1. Introduction

John Harper's scholarly project of the liturgical enactment of late medieval worship draws on the proposal that investigation of the multiplex reality of 'ancient' ritual procedures would be greatly helped through actual performance. Some of the implications of such a fully orchestrated 'staging', including the detailed reconstruction of spatial contexts, vestments, artefacts, music and audience, triggered me to probe the issue of 'informed sensitivity'. I take this concept in its wider meaning and ramifications: in the transition from incomplete shorthand text to fully scripted performance, what do bodies know, and how do sense experiences inform us? I peruse these questions more or less independently of Harper's project by joining the ranks of what is broadly referred to as 'anthropology of the senses' or 'sensuous anthropology'.

Re-enactment or representation of reality is a razor's edge: every 'correct' reproduction of what once was, or may have been, still is, or is in the process of becoming before our eyes, is subject to a staggering stack of shifting subjectivities and simultaneities. Even more so, both the postcolonial and the postmodern predicaments may hinder us in the serious pursuit of knowledge. It may seem more direct to produce than to re-produce, and at times we may prefer the moment over the linear, the experiential over the discursive, or participation over representation. Such quandaries are inherent to the study of ritual, especially when we walk the razor's edge between history and the present, or between participation and observation. In both situations the perceptive researcher is painfully aware of non-linear realities, the arbitrariness of categories, the simultaneity and often mutually conflicting messages of sense impressions, and the habitual dichotomies we so much need to avoid. Because in studying rituals we enter the engagement with embodied culture.

This essay is an attempt to explore the betwixt-and-between of participant observation. Even if we do not have a recording device stealthily running in our pocket, or a camera discretely hidden in the palm of our hand, we are 'recording' *impressions* mentally, with the explicit objective of processing them into neatly ordered *expressions* of a descriptive and even analytic nature afterwards,

from which, preferably, we have edited ourselves out.¹ This recording device in our head is powered by a lifetime's stock of theories and concepts as well as by culturally specific hierarchies in the human sensorium tending to produce lop-sided sense impressions favoring sight and sound over the so-called lower senses.

My critical exploration of sense hierarchies was triggered by John Harper's daring and contested, but undeniably creative and challenging ritual re-enactment of a supposedly historical performative reality.² In Harper's staging of a ritual performance, as plausible and authentic as possible within the limits of contemporary understanding, one could easily see a doomed venture of replicating past realities for the sake of nostalgia. But one could also take it as a challenge to probe into the sensitivities, the subjectivities, and the intersensorial experiences of 'the sacred' as (probably, plausibly) lived by people in an era so radically different from ours. I take this last approach. My aim in this essay is to explore such a project as a horizon pulling human imagination forward: even if the entire project would be a narcissistic game with one's own contemporary imagination, and its team should remain modest about claims to historic authenticity, it offers the opportunity to muse about the staged reality that all ritual is, by definition.

2. Historiography – what is tradition?

Cross-time studies resemble cross-culture studies to the extent that for the researcher, working from whatever disciplinary field, 'the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.' This opening sentence of L.P. Hartley's novel *The go-between*³ has become almost proverbial, and it seems to be particularly apt to illustrate both our limitations and fascinations concerning the past. Transgressing to 'alien' texts, artefacts, vestments, music, and spatial contexts, as in Harper's project, may be as much an innovating learning experience full of pitfalls as transgressing to other countries and other cultures and other time periods has been (and continues to be) for me. As a philologically trained South Asia specialist focusing on religious rituals I was triggered by many of the implications of this team's venture to recreate the full sensory experience of late medieval worship through full-fledged re-enactments.

¹ B. TEDLOCK: 'From participant observation to the observation of participation: The emergence of narrative ethnography', in *Journal of anthropological research* 47/1 (1991) 69-94, p.72.

² J. HARPER: 'Investigating medieval ritual through liturgical enactment', to be published in L. WOODHEAD (ed.): *How to research religion. Putting methods into practice* (Oxford 2013) (forthcoming);

for the project see also www.ahrc.ac.uk/News-and-Events/Features/Pages/The-experience-of-worship.aspx.

³ L.P. HARTLEY: *The go-between* (London 1953).

Most academic studies are necessarily reductive. Reduction means: to render data in terms of a chosen perspective. In spite of all the boundaries that the academic study of religion theoretically respects and obeys, much crossing of boundaries and blurring of edges is constantly taking place, both within academia and outside in 'the real world' of needs, hopes and fears. The historian of religion or the area specialist may not like this, and would rather keep a particular tradition (and especially its scriptures) within its contained time or space. Things become even more complex when we, on the basis of surviving liturgical manuals or shorthand ritual guidebooks, set out to describe and analyze intricate ritual procedures. Highly literate cultures may have preserved ancient text books on rituals, in varying degrees of (in)completeness, yet we are restrained by the fact that such texts offer, at best, mere shorthand versions of a protocol that had a much fuller expression and memorization in oral transmission, learning-by-doing, and the abilities of bodies to remember, repeat and reiterate.

Rituals are inscribed on bodies. Bodies carry rituals forward from occasion to occasion, from performance to performance, and from era to era. And should this living chain of transmission become broken, dissipated, forbidden or otherwise interrupted or corrupted, surviving ritual texts are often poor adumbrations of, respectively poor substitutes for, embodied ritual practice. But what exactly is the past, what is tradition?⁴ Paraphrasing and updating Hartley with today's acknowledgements of the limits inherent to any form of knowledge we might say: the past may be a foreign country where things were done differently, but, alas, the past already differed from itself when it still was the present. Ritual is 'lived' religion, and even at the heydays of a particular tradition it is a 'living' thing, subject to multidirectional changes, adaptations and shifts in both its performative aspects and its interpretation. Ritual theories in tandem with the multiple and multidisciplinary investigation of ritual practices have greatly helped us to desist from freezing rituals in time or assuming essences beyond the dynamics of the lived realities, even of such traditionalist activities as religious rituals.⁵

When we study past practices, such as rituals, one of the fundamental caveats is the disjunction between principles or proscriptions and actual practices in individual and social realities there and then. This disjunction is foremost in understanding how texts work, and how cultures work. Moreover, trans-historical enactment is a type of historiography that intersects with current concerns: there is a reason why we make historical investigations or ritual re-enactments of liturgical performances no longer current today. This may be the notion of a spiritually noble past (or, respectively, a noble 'other', the 'noble

⁴ See, for instance, S. ENGLER & G.P. GRIEVE (eds.): *Historicizing 'tradition' in the study of religion* (Berlin 2005), especially its Introduction, 'Illuminating the half-life of tradition: Legitimation, agency, and counter hegemonies' 1-16.

⁵ See, for instance, A. MICHAELS (ed.): *Ritual dynamics and the science of ritual* 1-5 (Wiesbaden 2010-2011).

savage', our noble forebears) from which or whom inspiring visions are sought. Selective de-contextualized and a-historic mining of the past for the sake of contemporary preoccupations and problems is being done by a motley crowd in varying degrees of expertise and with a wide range of motives. Dynamic 'lived' religion forms no exception to this. Such creative revisionism may be looked at with suspicion by many, both within a particular religious tradition and in academia, but it indicates how religion works 'on the ground'. Time and traditions are not neatly contained: they go around in loops, they get stranded and get afloat again, they may seem stagnant but even in apparent stasis slight changes and adaptations may be detectable. And, of course, in the pendulum of cultural dynamics, they may be re-invented, re-introduced, and celebrated anew in a revivalist spirit.

History is one of the most important cultural tools to make sense of one's situation, to establish identity, define otherness, and explain change. Religion appears to be the cultural phenomenon that is most intensively legitimized by its traditionalism. By and large, views on religion are dominated by the claims of the beyond-place-and-time eternity of divine beings and the traditionalism of religious practices. In a typical manner, religions do not only tell a local history, but world and cosmic history. This implies pervasive orientations in which mythology and history are not opposites but variants of narratives deployed rhetorically.⁶

The task of 'emic' historiography is pursued with much ingenuity and creativity. The subjective and interpretive nature of such frameworks may be acknowledged, but they are often all we have, in retrospect.

3. Ritual as (re-)enactment

The as-if loops in which time and eternity, the mythological and the historical, the particular and the universal, or the real and the imagined are being played out in ritual performances may well be indicative of one of the basic mechanisms of religious ritual: to do as if. Performance theory but also emotion theory may help us to understand why and how this works. The culturally produced symbolic order needs regular re-affirmation, replenishment, re-invigoration, repetition, reiteration, freshly infused memorization, and revitalized self-actualization, especially at key moments, such as the joints of time. Randall Collins calls this 'Interaction ritual chains'.⁷ A symbolic order needs mainte-

⁶ For illustrations of this, see G.G. IGGERS: *Historiography in the twentieth century. From scientific objectivity to the postmodern challenge* (Hanover, NH 1997); from across cultures, see Q.E. VANG & G.G. IGGERS (eds.): *Turning points in historiography. A cross-cultural perspective* (Rochester, NY 2002).

⁷ R. COLLINS: *Interaction ritual chains* (Princeton, NJ 2004). For a creative and critical use of Collins' model of interaction ritual, see, among others, E. SUMMERS-EFFLER: 'Ritual

nance, both at the individual and at the collective level. And one of the requirements to make such performances work is the intricate chemistry between full performance scripts and the affirming experience by each of the various groups and individuals involved. However, what exactly is experienced as effective (or fulfilling, or meeting the expectations) by individuals in the audience, various actors involved in the performance, or the collectivity at large, is impossible to grasp. Ronald Grimes' proposal to make ritual criticism – one of the basic needs expressed on the platform of ritual studies by many – a habitual ingredient of academic engagement with rituals, hasn't progressed much, although there are fascinating attempts, such as in Ute Hüsken's collection of articles in the book *When rituals go wrong*.⁸

What meta-narrative is it that needs to be regularly replenished? Frits Staal has become famous for his project of a staged performance of the Vedic ritual of Agnicayana, a twelve-day fire ritual, in Kerala, India, in 1975.⁹ It was claimed that his venture was unique, being performed by those few Nambudiri Brahmin families who had kept an unbroken 3,000 year tradition. Its full recording (funded by various American academic associations), including preparations and rehearsals, was regarded justified as a way to keep the minutiae of this particular ritual for posterity before it would become extinct forever.¹⁰ We now know that comparable Vedic performances may have been going on in isolated pockets in India in irregular intervals over three millennia, unknown to Western scholars, and unknown to most Indian *pandits* as well, for the simple reason that they remained mostly unrecorded. In such a long continuous history the gap between what was then considered the last-but-one performance, in 1956, and its famous 1975 performance, may seem not very alarming in our present hindsight bias, all the more so since at least three more have been performed, in 1990, 2006, and 2011. This case not only illustrates that ritual knowledge may be

theory', in J.E. STETS & J.H. TURNERS (eds.): *Handbook of the sociology of emotions* (New York, NY 2006) 135-154, pp. 138-139.

⁸ U. HÜSKEN (ed.): *When rituals go wrong. Mistakes, failure, and the dynamics of ritual* (= Studies in the history of religion 115) (Leiden / Boston 2007).

⁹ The film, made of the 1975 performance of the Agnicayana was published as R.G. GARDNER & J.F. STAAL: *Altar of fire* (Berkeley / Harvard 1976). A two-volume set of reflections on the performance appeared in 1983 with photographs by A. de Menil in J.F. STAAL, C.V. SOMAYAJIPAD & M. ITTI RAVI NAMBU DIRI (eds.): *Agni, the Vedic ritual of the fire altar* (Berkeley / Harvard 1983).

¹⁰ There is a catch, however. Because of contemporary sensitivities, all documented Agnicayanas have been performed (or, at least: filmed) without the required goat sacrifice, and may thus be deemed incomplete. Instead, an effigy was used. Richard Schechner, one of the major authors in the field of the performative dimension of ritual behavior, refers critically to this 'staged' Agnicayana performance in his book R. SCHECHNER: *Between theater and anthropology* (Pennsylvania 1989) 55-65 and 92-100. See also R.N. MACCAULEY & E.T. LAWSON: *Bringing ritual to mind. Psychological foundations of cultural forms* (Cambridge 2002) 151-155.

stored in texts, in bodies, in oral transmissions, as well as in collective memories, but also that the need for certain rituals may rise and wane, and re-appear with slightly different meta-narratives. What may once have been expressed as a need to ritually reinforce elementary powers for the rejuvenation of the cosmos, or to build up an immortal body for the sacrificer (*yajamāna*), may now also be expressed in terms of scholarly, didactic, artistic and touristic purposes.¹¹

The magic undercurrent of many rituals originating in the distant past is subject to a process of psychologization as well. To what extent people in the past actually experienced such magic to work for the cosmos at large – this being the rationale that formed the meta-narrative of many costly and complicated enterprises – or that people of all times and climes tend to psychologize ritual, i.e. eclectically and subjectively appropriate only certain aspects as meaningful for themselves individually, is not for us to decide here. In Harper's project the responses and experiences of all actors are explicitly part of the investigation. Bodies, senses, subjectivities are taken serious enough to be listened to, and become part of the academic outcomes. Naturally, there is an awkward gap between the doing-as-if of any ritual and the twice-over doing-as-if by present actors, however informed and even spiritually inspired they may be by partaking in a reconstruction of something meant to be worshipful in the first place. In what may be an unexpected parallel, in the terms of a recent ethnographic exhibition even an unexpected encounter,¹² we may use Richard Schechner's words on the 1975 Nambudiri priest-actors and apply them to John Harpers' actors of the faithful: 'It is not accurate to call them actors, and it is not accurate to not call them actors. They are between "not actors" and "not not actors", a liminal realm of double negativity that precisely locates the process of theatrical characterization.'¹³

We may also speak of aestheticization here. Does the cosmos or humanity depend on such worship? Hardly. Is this worship in function of the Christian community or society at large, in a Durkheimian sense? It may have this side effect, for some, but it is far from its primary motive. Would it generate faith, would it create a warm feeling of belonging to a wonderful and profound tradition that for a moment opens its treasure trove? Perhaps. It may be make-believe but it may also make belief. But first and foremost it is meant to produce knowledge, knowledge through testing, knowledge through subjective and

¹¹ An example of an artistic re-creation of Vedic fire rituals is the double event initiated by artist Wolfgang Laib, February 2009, on Mountain Melavalavu north of Madurai in India, and June 2009, in the courtyard of the Merz Foundation in Turin, Italy.

¹² 'Unexpected Encounters' (*Onverwachte Ontmoetingen*) is the name of an exhibition in the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, from 30 November 2012 until 14 July 2013. In this temporary exhibition every subunit consists of two completely different objects from the museum's collection paired with each other. The first reaction may be disorientation, then surprise, possibly followed by insights and appreciations on a completely new level of associative understanding.

¹³ SCHECHNER: *Between theater and anthropology* 97.

collective experiences: a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a *Glasperlenspiel*, a *Totalerfahrung*. The compoundedness of the set-up, in spite of all scholarly caveats and reservations regarding historical authenticity, may thus provide an added value in various respects exactly because its actors systematically (sometimes cleverly, sometimes clumsily) navigate between observation and participation and back again.

4. Ritual as performance

Contemporary performance studies question exactly this: the habitual dichotomy between acting and being as if the two are neatly divided. Ritual performances are excellent examples of a double- (or rather multiple-)bind loyalty. There may be (happy, meaningful) moments when the two fuse, when the as-if loop dissolves, when the moment impresses itself on us in its totality instead of its divisions and distinctions. Nevertheless, everyone who has been in fieldwork situations (and haven't we been all, in one way or another?) may also recognize the relief when we return to our trained analytical self.

The loop in which impression and expression are swaying – and being swayed by the multilayeredness, multidirectionality and multisensoriality of a performance – is particularly evident in the study of religious ritual. Even the staunchest ethnographer is involved, with his body, his senses, his own script, his own agenda. In the role of witness he or she gets temporarily put off guard by a particular sense impression whereas in the role of participant he/she may get lost in a mood of boredom, estrangement and feeling ridiculous. In the field we become aware of our prejudices, our fickle minds, our impressionable bodies, our continuous swing between 'ought' and 'is'. Sitting in a church while taking part in a funeral service is a case in point. Most people then swing between a wide range of thoughts and emotions, even to the point when they might say: it was a beautiful comforting service, but I don't believe a word of it.

Is there a third order transcending such dichotomies, such splits, such loops? And if so, how to use it to our advantage, as scholars, as historians, as ethnographers, as humans? Schechner remarks on this: This double, or triple, life is typically that of theater actors; it is the theatrical brand of truth.¹⁴ And increasingly those scholars who started studying religious rituals find themselves crossing multiple boundaries: 'performance' has become an important conceptual bridge among disciplines.¹⁵ Aspects of game, play, role and enactment highlight the use of dramatic principles in describing, analyzing and discussing ritual behavior. The performance approach to ritual may have the advantage of side-stepping the mind/body and thought/action dichotomies and focusing on

¹⁴ SCHECHNER: *Between theater and anthropology* 96.

¹⁵ R. GRIMES: 'Performance theory and the study of ritual', in P. ANTES, A.W. GEERTZ & R.R. WARNE (eds.): *New approaches to the study of religion* 2. *Textual, comparative, sociological, and cognitive approaches* (Berlin / New York 1990) 109-138, p. 109.

meaningful expressive physical movements, thus potentially re-integrating the bifurcated disciplines of cultural studies and social sciences. Moreover, studying how people do things in a culturally effective as well as socially expressive way may liberate the academic study of religion from the habitual *sui generis* approach. At the same time, to some the performance approach seems to have opened a Pandora's box of evils, or as Catherine Bell phrases this: 'At times the enthusiasm for bringing a performance approach to bear on various aspects of religion has appeared to push sober discretion aside.'¹⁶

For our present purposes in this essay the performance approach may be toned down by using the word 'performativity' and thus accentuating the ritual process (or Bell's alternatives 'ritualization' and 'ritual-like activities') as a sensuous event. Attending to the emotional, aesthetic, physical and sensory aspects of religious behavior lays open the scholar's own position in relation to the observed action.

5. Ritual as embodied culture

In the Cartesian split bodies and senses are often suspect when it comes to validity. But in the last decades some remarkable turns have been taken in this regard. I take museums as an example. Some may call museums today's secular temples, but that is not the issue here. What I want to point out is the acknowledgement that there are alternative ways to education and cognition. Why relying on the written text beneath the painting before taking the artwork in with all our senses? Why ordering the museum's collection according to style periods, areas, genres, cultures, materials, etcetera? Why not blowing a visitor's mind by exposing objects in totally unexpected combinations and unlikely parallels, such as Amsterdam's Tropenmuseum does in its temporary exhibition 'Unexpected Encounters' by pairing two wildly disparate objects from its collection. Or what the recently re-opened Rijksmuseum intends to do by hiring Alain de Botton, the British writer-philosopher, as a guest curator in 2014. De Botton proposes to leave out the usual pedantic factual tone, chronology and all other criteria for combining or segregating museum objects, and instead appeal to our non-domesticated unordered non-discursive self. The idea behind both initiatives may be characterized as attempts to speak to the child in us, the poet, the rebel, the sensualist, the associative genius, and engage with our skills for creative playful insights more than with the usual filing and ordering systems in our heads through which we may have been deformed. It was quite predictable, however, that the latter initiative, which is merely in its embryonic

¹⁶ C. BELL: 'Performance', in M.C. TAYLOR (ed.): *Critical terms for religious studies* (Chicago / London 1998) 205-224, p. 208.

state right now, was met with the usual critique from those who decline the dishonor of being spoken to in such 'infantilizing' tones.¹⁷

Fiona Bowie, in her chapter 'The Body as Symbol' elaborates on the dual ways of how our body produces culture, and how culture shapes the body.¹⁸ By body we often seem to mean the contours of our physical appearance and its internal machinery. Just as in the above example of our usual encounter with a museum's collection, in its normal emphasis on the preservation of the material past in a glass case, we detect the widespread hypervaluation of vision. And critics may be right, even this vision takes place only after we have read the accompanying notice. In our day-to-day social reality our cultural awareness of bodies is often predominantly through sight. The result is that we merely touch the surface, take in the world mostly 'at face value', a world, moreover, which is increasingly mediated through screens instead of through direct vision. Human contours and skins may be intensely fascinating in themselves, but even in cultural and anthropological studies much more attention goes to how such bodies are decorated, marked, trained, stratified, tested, dressed, gendered, covered, mutilated, painted, tattooed, purified, fed, etcetera. Our experience of the bodies and materiality's around us is often dominated by what our eyes tell us of their surfaces.

Constance Classen in some of her work takes a different turn: she forays into the alternative worlds of cultural others in whom the senses are ordered in completely different ways than what has become standard among contemporary Westerners.¹⁹ She introduces her readers to life worlds in which the senses are weighted, connected or distinguished in culturally specific ways that produce a dramatically different mode of knowing and interpreting the surrounding reality. In one of her groundbreaking publications she uses the example of the Desana people living in the Colombian rainforest. They are presented as a society in which all sensations convey valuable social information, and in which all the senses are brought into play in the social process. All sensory energies in their world form a radiant network: food is prepared according to olfactory guidelines, the sounds of different musical instruments are believed to encourage animals to procreate and plants to pollinate, the taste of every fruit is imbued with a message about the social and cosmic order, all animals in the forest are classified according to their odor, and colors are ordered according to their three respective energies (white, yellow and red). The complexity of the De-

¹⁷ As did Maxim FEBRUARI in his column 'Het wiegen van de kunstbeschouwer', in NRC 22/23 April 2013, p. 14.

¹⁸ F. BOWIE: *The anthropology of religion. An introduction* (Malden / Oxford 2006) 34-61.

¹⁹ C. CLASSEN: *Worlds of sense. Exploring the senses in history and across cultures* (London / New York 1993); IDEM: 'Foundations for an anthropology of the senses', in *International social science journal* 153 (1997) 401-412; IDEM: 'The senses', in P. STEARNS (ed.): *Encyclopedia of European social history from 1350 to 2000*. 4 (New York 2001) 360-362.

sana's sensory theories is directly connected to their behavior: it orders their world in cognitive categories and prescribes 'best' behavior.²⁰

In addition to providing us, creatures of the eye, with fascinating insights into experiences of reality that may seem utterly poetic, enchanted and almost psychedelic to us, it confronts us with the sobering realization that our own systems of knowledge are no more than ethnocentric social codes, tunnel visions, literally. Could this growing awareness of our lopsided and truncated sense faculties – with the predominance of vision, and underdeveloped or even atrophied other senses – help us to critique our surface values? Roses today have been cultivated to wonders of visual perfection, but they lost one of their main lures in this process: they lost odor. Or, as David Howes, who collaborated with Constance Classen in various publications, puts it: in the case of cultivated roses there has been a visual eclipse of smell. He reflects: 'What is the world like to a culture that takes actuality in less visual, more auditory or olfactory, gustatory or tactile, terms than those to which we are accustomed?'²¹

Other cultures and other times do not necessarily divide the sensorium as we do. And could we, should we, in a reconstruction of what medieval worship may have been like for all those involved, then and there, take into account that our present sense faculties are hardly able to inform us on what medieval peasants, medieval choir boys or the lord and lady from the castle experienced in the original church setting?

6. Body, senses, the sensorium

Vivid descriptions of the sensoria of ethnographic situations have been largely overshadowed by analytical prose. Yet the sensory qualities of ritual are obvious, both in their profusion and their constraint. Sensory deprivation is known in many cultures as an effective means to heighten awareness of either one's inner worlds or of the revelation, initiation or sacrament that is planned directly afterwards. Long periods of physical discomfort lead to the recompense of grace, and aural constraint makes the single voice or tone all the more liberating and meaningful. The creation of a strong sense of threshold in order to experience heightened meaning directly following the deprivation is one of the tricks in the ritual toolbox all over the world.

At the other side of the spectrum, our senses may become overwhelmed and unsettled by the sheer show character of ritual. In a parallel to sensory deprivation sensory overload is an effective tool to bring unwary participants to

²⁰ C. CLASSEN: 'Other ways to wisdom. Learning through the senses across cultures', in *International review of education* 45/3-4 (1999) 269-280.

²¹ D. HOWES (ed.): *The varieties of sensory experience. A sourcebook in the anthropology of the senses* (Toronto 1991) 6. See also IDEM: *Sensual relations. Engaging the senses in culture and social theory* (Ann Arbor 2003).

heightened or altered states of consciousness. I may use Hindu burial as an example. The sheer physicality of a corpse (which had been alive less than 24 hours ago) being cremated on an open pyre by a severely polluted river in the heat of the day impresses itself on the senses in such a way that our mind opts out. Vivid intersensorial impressions take over our usual mental control. Such a lucid state of shock may not be to everyone's liking, but as a first-time-ever we have literally faced death through all our senses.

Images, objects, performances, landscapes, architectures etc., with their multiple sensory dimensions, have become a central field in material culture study. Characterized as 'the sensual turn' by some, such studies debate the unified nature of the human sensorium.²² Anthropologists like David Howes, Constance Classen, Alain Corbin and Paul Stoller highlight the multisensoriality embedded in the materiality of human existence. In methodological terms this implies that the evidence of our senses is equally worthy of academic attention in the humanities. Phrased more emphatically: due to the verbal-sonic and visual biases intrinsic to dominant socio-scientific accounts of 'meaning', the other senses have been largely neglected and deserve retribution, reconciliation as well as restoration.²³

Intersensoriality, in its turn, is meant to refer to the ritual process of bringing many or all of the senses into play simultaneously. Although the concept has the potential to provide valuable insights into the efficacy (and lack of it, as in ritual criticism) of ritual, it would need much more research before many aspects of cultural performances could be illuminated by it. For the moment, the concept carries the poetics of possibility, but before some major questions have been answered it is no more than a helpful notion. Some of the more pressing questions would be about the sequencing of sense perceptions (instead of simultaneity), or the way different senses may give rise to different meanings (instead of a unified meaning). Sometimes the senses seem to all be working together harmoniously, whereas at other times sensations will be conflicted and may consequently confuse us deeply.

Society shapes the senses, just as the sensorium is a social fact. This is especially seen in the hierarchies in which the senses are held.²⁴ Dominant groups in the West were conventionally associated with the so-called higher senses of sight and hearing, whereas the supposedly lower senses (smell, taste and touch) were often connected to subordinate groups (women, laborers, non-Westerners). In religion this mechanism may be even enhanced by a related

²² C. PINNEY: 'Visual culture', in V. BUCHLI (ed.): *The material culture reader* (Oxford 2002) 81-104, p. 85; see also the discussion on synaesthesia and intersensoriality in D. HOWES: 'Scent, sound and synaesthesia: intersensoriality and material culture theory', Chapter ten in C. TILLEY (ed.): *Handbook of material culture* (London 2006).

²³ D. HOWES (ed.): *The varieties of sensory experience* 3.

²⁴ W. VAN BEEK: 'Eyes on top? Culture and the weight of the senses', in A. STORCH (ed.): *Perception of the invisible. Religion, historical semantics and the role of perceptive verbs* (Köln 2010) (= *Sprache und Geschichte in Afrika* 21 (2010)) 245-270.

ordering system, that of spirit over mind, and mind over matter. There may be a cultural continuity in such hierarchies, but they are not only culture-specific, they are also subject to the *Zeitgeist*. Artists, countercultural movements, tricksters, marginal or occult secret societies, as well as mystics may challenge this order from time to time, as do children, synaesthetes, and everyone who has just fallen in love.

7. Thinking through the body²⁵

What relation do we presuppose, in common parlance, between our self and our body: are we our body or do we happen to have a body? We may tend to distance our self from the body if that strategy is to our advantage, but may as well on occasion have to admit that we 'are' far more our body than that we 'have' it. Pursuing an academic career tends to be a rather disembodied activity, but in ritual and liturgical studies, especially in as far as they deal with practices, our main field is an embodied reality, however lopsided. John Harper's project could be seen as a transition from text to performance as much as it is a transition from the imagined disembodied past to embodied reality in the present. If I take a cue from my own autobiographical turning points, I would count the first multisensory and intersensory experience of an open cremation fire by a river in India as an example of a cultural fact that I had previously collected as a 'merely' mental reality now turning into an embodied reality that hit me with the full force of all the senses.

Is this what a liturgical or ritual enactment project is about? Is it about bridging between past and present, between 'ought' and 'is', between prescription and description? That too, I presume. But being mindful of bodies and senses, and deeply questioning the impressions of all those involved – including oneself, as the researcher – may additionally result in a more integrated expression of what a ritual is about and how it may work. It may also start to explain more adequately why rituals move in chains, in cycles, in rhythms determined by the annual calendar, the axial points of individual lives, the potentially dangerous and therefore meaningful joints of society's collective body, and the larger loops in interstellar configurations. French anthropologists and language preferences in India have an unexpected similarity here: both indicate that raw reality needs to be 'cooked' in order to become palatable and digestible. This is not just a matter of food: it concerns all meaningful reality. Ritual performances are likewise ways of 'cooking' raw reality. It is no coincidence that most types of

²⁵ I gratefully derive this phrase from J. GALLOP: *Thinking through the body* (New York 1988), a book written from the perspective of gender studies. I find the fact that the focus on bodies, just as on the so-called lower senses, is often connected with 'others' (women, non-Westerners) illustrative for my argument, as if, in academia as well as in the field, it is women and cultural others who need to remind us that we think through our bodies and senses as well as through our talkative heads.

Hindu rituals are organized around an open fire. And by engaging bodies and senses in ritual behavior reality is being 'processed': it comes down and settles in us. But just like food it needs to be replenished regularly.

The endless chatter on 24/7 television news broadcasting channels has earned the slightly derogatory characterization of 'nothing but talking heads'. The verbal comments to the news, going round the clock, often are poor representations of lived reality in the field. Much of our academic work consists of the same activity: giving verbal comments to 'uncooked' reality by 'cooking' it into a system. But before we act as talking heads, have we actually thought with and through the body, that of the ritual actors involved in performative action, as well as through our own body?

In some Indian philosophical systems the mind (*manas*) is no more than a sixth sense: not in the meaning of intuition or paranormal antennae, but exactly what the term indicates: the mind is no more than sense number six. It distinguishes itself from the other five sense organs and sense faculties only in so far as it coordinates the input, not unlike an old-fashioned telephone switchboard. *Manas*, then, takes in the incoming calls of the senses, and relegates them, in 'processed' form, to its superior, *Citta*, consciousness. In other words, in this particular worldview the mind's task is no more than 'pre-cooking' sense-informed reality in order to present it to the desk of our overview consciousness. This implies that humans by nature would be far more sensuous (i.e. sense-reliant) in their mental activities than was commonly taken in the paradigms that long dominated Western mind/body dichotomies.

I am not pleading to take over the alternative systems of our cultural others. I merely draw attention to the fact that thinking through the body is what we may have been doing all along. But just as in participant observation we may have been taught to edit ourselves out of the equation in the stage of writing up our field reports, we have been socialized into favoring the higher over the lower senses. When transgressing to either the past or the distant we should be well aware of this.

8. Sensing 'the sacred'?

Up to this point in my essay I have cleverly and strategically avoided the term 'sacred'. In my daily habitat, the Tilburg Religion & Ritual group, the so-called 'minimally sacred' has become a calibration point for tracing contemporary situations in which some basic sense of the sacred may cautiously be indicated, from pop festivals to secular pilgrimage, from rituals after disasters to electronic condolence webpages, and from a church turned into a bookshop/booktemple to ritual-like behavior in the domestic sphere. Although I suggest that such studies could gain in depth by involving the senses – both those of the objects of study as those of the ethnographer – more systematically, I will not explicitly use this perspective here. Delving into past religious practices and trying to

make fuller sense of them by re-enacting them in the here and now, confronts us with parts of the meta-narratives – as also the sacred – that remained untold in the shorthand textbooks that have survived. One aspect of this tour of the imagination through reconstructed materiality's, spatiality's and ethnically or historically specific sensitivities is that we lend our bodies and senses to such a project: our own bodies and senses become objectified through their very subjectivities.²⁶ This tour de force, much critiqued by some, finds its parallels in what some ethnographic museums do when they invite visitors' multisensorial participation: touch this object, enter the dark enclosure of a tribal hut, put on this mask, feel this fabric, taste this herb, listen to the background noises of an 'Oriental' bazaar, smell how spices are being pounded, and so on, in a potentially endless combination of sense experiences, however artificial the setting of such an ethnographic display may be.

Another parallel is found in what most of us in our academic career do at one time or another: participant observation. As a method it is not uncontested. In varying degrees we play the roles of the amateur observer, the armchair anthropologist, the professional ethnographer, and the fieldworker 'gone native'. British and American schools in ethnographic investigation tend to emphasize individual research and use an experiential approach often labeled as participant observation. There is no doubt that this methodological stance causes stress, and needs a clever navigation between physical involvement and mental detachment. Things become even more complicated when our object of study requires a cross-time move and when diachronic approaches become mixed with synchronic considerations, as they do in Harper's project. In a way, Frits Staal, in his enactment of the ancient Vedic Agnicayana before a select audience of Indological scholars, had a dilemma of his own, since standards of ritual correctness and historic authenticity were often at odds with the local social events surrounding it, as well as with the media requirements stated by the film crew. The result, *Altar of fire*,²⁷ was, in Schechner's terms, a questionable product of 'twice-restored behavior' that would have gained in credibility if it had been followed by an anthropologically more honest sequel called *The making of*.

Sensation is an integral part of a wide range of ritual, devotional and mystical practices all over the world. At the same time, many faiths are characterized by intense suspicions of not only the human body but the senses as well. There is a strange paradox here. Bodies and senses must be tamed, domesticated, controlled, restrained and sublimated in order to be worthy of 'the sacred', yet we have scores of glowing accounts of religious experiences in which either individual sense perceptions of the divine are recorded in outpourings of salvific sweetness and mystic participation, or the sacred is collectively referred to in often blatantly sensuous terms. The sacred appears to be encountered in such a

²⁶ C.M. FUREY: 'Body, society, and subjectivity in religious studies', in *Journal of the American academy of religion* 80 (2012) 7-32.

²⁷ GARDNER & STAAL: *Altar of fire*.

mode of intimacy and intensity that records are brimming with embodied experiences: haptic spirituality, tactile piety, heavenly tunes, blazing lights, the sweet taste of divine grace and the odor of sanctity. In enumerating these I haven't even started to point at the erotic undertones of many such testimonies.

The sensate certainty of this type of religious experiences may be brushed aside disdainfully by many, but when we are engaged in the study of ritual practices we can't escape them. Those who perform, invent, reproduce, or otherwise orchestrate ritual activities can't ignore the basic question of 'how the sacred is created', and neither can the scholar in liturgical or ritual studies circumvent the question of 'how the sacred is sensed' and 'made sense of' in what often is a collation of 'ought' and 'is' as well as 'wanna-be'.

In a practice-led project like Harper's full-scale enactment of late-medieval worship these aspects were not only not ignored, they were explicitly made part of the investigation. Methodologically this project's validity may be questioned on various points. But as someone who grew up with the virulent discussions around Frits Staal's enactment of the Vedic Agnicayana Fire Ceremony, a ritual tradition considered to be at least 3,000 years old and deemed to be on the brink of extinction at the time when it was staged in front of cameramen and an assembly of Indological scholars, I am triggered by the 'experiential' nature of Harper's venture. As far as I know in Staal's project the experiential question was never posed, not in the proposal for funding, neither in the negotiations with the Nambudiri priests, nor in the ensuing publications or their reviews.

Admitting that Harper's two-fold mode of investigation – historical reconstruction and exploration of experiences – in many ways is a play of the imagination, I am triggered by this project's explicit and programmatic inclusion of the sensory, emotional and spiritual. In the preparatory phase scrupulous attention went to the materiality of the enactment: the spatial configurations, the feel of the fabrics, the touch of the floor, the acoustics, the organ, the icon to be kissed, the color schemes, liturgical routing, comportment, body languages divided by social classes, etcetera. This may resemble the elaborate set-up in costume films or Shakespearean theatre, but in this case it was not the audience whose appreciation was targeted, it was the range of experiences of those play-acting the faithful.

To me this is an indication of our present era's growing academic acknowledgement of the senses in the study of the sacred. Not because the sacred may deserve a *sui generis* treatment. Rather, I take the position that the sacred is *made*, and is not a category in its own right. But I do advocate more serious study of how the sacred is *sensed*.

9. Conclusion and follow-up questions

French philosopher Merleau Ponty posits that we are embodied perceivers, carnal observers, and corporeal interpreters of our observations.²⁸ The conflation of these three is especially relevant in participant observation of religious rituals. Methodologies of performativity should include the various as-if loops in which both the faithful and the researcher may be involved, often simultaneously. Subjectivities, senses and sensations form a messy field for the academic, but when their interactions and intersections with the more objective and scripted aspects of ritual performances are taken into account we may be better able to understand what makes a ritual 'work' in today's world. At the very least this would result in better and richer descriptions. With this I do not see a mature and universally valid ritual criticism just over the horizon yet, but minimally we may become more sensitive to the extent to which 'meaning' is being 'sensed'.

Our responses to objects in the world are processed through a sequence which begins with the sensory stimulus, are then made sense of through an internalized feedback loop, and may end with intelligent awareness in what we might call a pre-verbal state. This pre-linguistic state is, in adults, and under normal conditions, often followed by self-conscious reflective thought or expressions through language, gestures, and art. Both in the study and the experience of rituals we should acknowledge how this works, and even more so, in the light of ritual criticism, what good or effective ritual practice is. Why do we sometimes feel that shiver up the spine? Why do 'good rituals' make us land almost in the here and now? Why does good performance let listeners almost feel the wound (as in a Passion) with a deeply felt physical response? And why do they, at times, even almost taste or hear the wound, in an intersensory and synaesthetic experience? Ritual is not the real thing, just as art is not the real thing, but its sensuous imagery triggers deeply reverberating responses. And in the top-down/bottom-up feedback loop such responses stimulate the mind through emotions, whether consciously or below the level of consciousness.

In our socialization process we have learned to order sequentially, in retrospect, what often appears to be simultaneous, multimodal, multilayered and multidirectional. Sensory perceptions and intelligent conceptions often combine. Different parts of the brain are involved in perceiving through the different senses. And as scholars of ritual we seem to be at our best if we are able somehow to observe the workings of our own mind along with the 'meaning' behind the script, the image in the mind of the performer, the new link created by 'unexpected encounters', and the pool of memory and concepts on which cultures draw.

What message would this acknowledgement of the complex sensory and cognitive processes be able to give to the critical study of ritual, from the perspec-

²⁸ M. MERLEAU-PONTY: *Phenomenology of perception* (London 1962) 246.

tive of both the experiential and the descriptive-analytic side? First, the awareness that normally the senses combine to produce a kind of common, unitary, or integrated perceptual experience. In all the contemporary emphasis on both (re)cognition and ritual as chains of memory it may be underemphasized that ritual that 'works' is often built on both: the known and the unknown, the tenderly recognized familiar chain as well as the thrillingly new and unexpected connection. Artists know how to play with this: but do ritualists?

A second message would be: 'my' intellectualizing, conceptualizing retrospective of such a multicomponent perceptual experience of a ritual performance may be a far cry from 'yours'. Yes, we routinely recognize that in most things we can never know anything for sure. Yet academics often describe rituals as if they are one-dimensional sequences on a one-dimensional timeline, whereas experiences are in 3D. Can our descriptive language be both physically-sensorially representational and intellectually charged?

A third question pertains to the cultural limitations that have been placed onto the mind. As I indicated above, the ordering of what belongs to the domain of the senses, and what to the domain of the mind, is culturally specific. As, among others, David Howes and Constance Classen have shown, the five senses do not fit in the same neat boxes in all cultures. And what about the mind as – no more, no less – a sixth sense (such as in the ontological categories of the Sāmkhya philosophical tradition), acting as a switchboard between incoming sense 'calls' and the boss's office 'upstairs'? Product designers, for instance, have long acknowledged the appeal of multisensory aesthetics, and poets have a knack of leading us into a world of vibrant intersensoriality, but many academics still hold on to their ordering mechanisms. I suggest that the habitual tendency in the Western world to separate the senses from the mind for scientific purposes be questioned in the light of non-Western cultures. Any theory on ritual, if it is to hold cross-culturally, will necessarily be multimodal and acknowledge the multisensory or even intersensory organization of the brain.

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